



In-Person Worship in the Synod of Alberta and the Territories in an age of COVID-19 May 22, 2020

COVID-19 is having a transformative effect on our faith communities. We are being challenged as never before to quickly find unaccustomed ways of remaining connected to each other and proclaiming our faith in the risen Lord, Jesus Christ. One of the ways we can demonstrate our values is to continue to protect human life by following all Public Health guidelines.

The Province of Alberta has now published guidelines for businesses and places of worship that wish to reopen. The primary recommendation is this:

Worship leaders are encouraged to continue to hold services remotely and using other creative mechanisms such as drive-in services. All places of worship should follow the public health guidance . . . and review their programming and worship services to keep everyone, especially the most vulnerable, safe.

Any congregation considering meeting in person for worship once more is encouraged to form a team to carefully consider the needs and vulnerabilities of their congregation, and the expectations of Public Health officials. The team's first responsibility would be to familiarize themselves with the Alberta guidelines:

- <https://www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/covid-19-relaunch-guidance-places-of-worship.pdf>
- <https://www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/covid-19-workplace-guidance-for-business-owners.pdf>
- <https://www.alberta.ca/restrictions-on-gatherings.aspx> - singing

These guidelines call for significant changes to our customary experience of worship. Churches can allow only one-third of the normal worship attendance to gather, up to 50 attendees, whichever is smaller and allows for the required distancing. No congregational singing is permitted. Holy Communion can be offered only following strict protocols. Worshipers must use one common entrance and a separate exit, with no social gatherings before or after worship, keeping physical distance between households at all times.

When we consider the changes we must observe in order to hold in-person worship, we may be tempted to despair. We may feel like the returned Exiles who gathered to celebrate the laying of the foundation for the new Temple in Jerusalem. Half of that community shouted for joy, and half of them sobbed, remembering the splendour of the former Temple (Ezra 3:10-13), as Bishop Larry noted in his letter of May 11 (<https://albertasynod.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-updates-guidance-for-places-of-worship.pdf>).

Whether any congregation decides to continue virtual worship or to re-open in accordance with public health guidelines, it is inescapable that we are in a new reality. At every level of the church, we must

engage questions about the future of our mission. Bishop Larry articulated these questions in a thoughtful way in his May 11 letter.

- Congregation/synod – what is God’s mission through us – moving forward?
- What have we learned during the last few months about what is most important in our life together as the body of Christ that can shape how we live, work, and serve together from here forward? What might we bring forward into the future from this experience?
- What new skills have we picked up? What other skills and gifts do we need to embrace a new future?
- How might our theological, denominational, and biblical perspectives and traditions inform how we move forward?
- What among the things that seemed so important before the coronavirus crisis might we give less attention or let go of altogether?

We will want the decisions we make and the goals we set to reflect our faith in the God who set us free from sin and death, and calls us to be ambassadors of the Way of Jesus. As we meet, learn, discuss and decide, may this be the prayer of our worship planners, congregations and rostered ministers:

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (ELW, Morning Prayer)

Additional References

Province of Alberta

- Find ongoing updates, guidelines, and posters at <https://www.alberta.ca/coronavirus-info-for-albertans.aspx>

Synod of Alberta and the Territories

- See references in the COVID-19 area of the Synod web page, <https://albertasynod.ca>

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

- <https://www.elcic.ca/publichealth/>

Singing

- “A Conversation: What Do Science and Data Say About the Near Term Future of Singing” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DF13GsVzj6Q%t=1574s>
- "Singing, the Church, and COVID-19: A Caution for Moving Forward in Our Current Pandemic" <https://www.drheathernelson.com/singingandcovid19?fbclid=IwAR0IKM6RLowwiYp8A51t6mwGehTXV6bQlvxYcTcI99YIvFOOXewmOANcPNE>
- “Church Music in the Age of COVID-19,” Wisconsin Council of Churches <https://www.wichurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Returning-to-Church-Church-Music-final.pdf>

**A Checklist for In-Person Worship
in The Synod of Alberta and the Territories**

	Person Responsible	Done
Preparing the facility		
Clean and disinfect high-touch/shared surfaces such as doorknobs, light switches, toilet handles, faucets and taps, elevator buttons, railings.		
Designate separate entrance and exit with signage.		
Place hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol content at the entrance and exit and throughout the facility. If Holy Communion will be celebrated, have hand sanitizer available for worshipers as they proceed to the table.		
Put up posters educating worshipers about COVID-19 and distancing protocols.		
Determine whether your usual worship space is the best place for worship at this time. Perhaps you have a fellowship hall that is larger and more suitable just now.		
Clearly indicate the route worshipers are to use from the entry to the worship space and indicate proper physical distancing, perhaps with markers on the floor.		
Close common areas.		
Close rooms that will not be in use.		
Remove all shared items such as brochures and hymnals, and any soft surfaces such as children’s busy bags and stuffed animals.		
To indicate proper physical distancing, rearrange chairs or rope off every second pew.		
Ensure that worship leaders will have appropriate physical distance from each other and will have their own microphones.		
Place floor indicators to show physical distance for those who are waiting to receive Holy Communion.		
Designate how many people will be allowed in a washroom at one time; post a sign with floor indicators in the hallway to show physical distance for those who are waiting.		
Preparing Worshipers		
Communicate that staff, volunteers and worshipers who are ill or who have been exposed to COVID-19 must stay home.		
Communicate that those with underlying medical conditions and those over 65 years old are at a higher risk of experiencing worse symptoms than others if they contract the virus.		
Communicate changes to worship space.		
Communicate that worshipers are asked to keep physical distance at all times, practice good hand hygiene and sneeze into their elbows. It is recommended that worshipers wear non-medical masks when in the church.		

	Person Responsible	Done
Children are to remain with their parents at all times.		
Communicate changes to the worship service in advance (e.g., no congregational singing, reception of Holy Communion, no greeting or coffee hour before or after service).		
Preparing to Worship		
The number of people allowed in the worship space is determined (one-third of normal worship attendance up to 50 people, whichever is lowest) and a plan is in place to determine how many services will be offered in order to accommodate those who would wish to worship. <i>Clarification:</i> small assemblies can gather with 15 people even if that number is more than one-third of normal attendance.		
A plan is in place to determine who will worship when.		
A plan is in place to continue to include in worship those who will not attend in-person worship.		
A list is kept of worshipers, staff and volunteers at all services in case someone later tests positive for COVID-19 and their movements must be traced. This list will be kept for two weeks before it will be destroyed or deleted.		
Worship is planned in accordance with Public Health guidelines.		
Congregants are reminded to clean their hands on entry and exit.		
A plan is in place to help worshipers participate in the service. A single-use bulletin is left on chairs or pews AND/OR the bulletin is projected on a screen or available online.		
No congregational singing is permitted. Recorded or streamed music may be played. Soloists and instrumentalists may provide music following recommendations for safe distancing and/or barriers.		
Children will remain with their parents, even if a children's time is offered.		
The Peace is shared without physical contact.		
The offering plate is neither circulated nor presented at the altar. There is a plan to receive gifts safely. Encourage worshipers to make contributions through electronic means.		
A plan is in place to offer the sacraments safely.		
People are designated to clean and disinfect the worship space between services.		
Holy Communion		
Those preparing the elements and vessels for Holy Communion use excellent hygiene procedures.		
Pastors and assistants wash and sanitize their hands before blessing the elements and distributing Holy Communion.		
If the presiding minister has underlying health conditions (although not sick) or is otherwise vulnerable, they may have an assistant distribute Holy Communion.		

	Person Responsible	Done
Pastors and assistants wear a mask when distributing Holy Communion. Communicants are advised to also wear a mask.		
Pastors and assistants do not wear gloves when distributing Holy Communion.		
Worshippers are directed to servers in an organized fashion, leaving physical distance between family groups.		
Communicants sanitize their hands as they proceed to the table.		
It is recommended that to minimize close contact, the communicant pauses two metres away from the minister, who says, "The body of Christ," to which the response "Amen" is given. The minister should take special care not to touch the communicant, or should pause to wash hands again, if necessary.		
Communion in one kind is recognized as a full experience of the Sacrament. Consider offering bread only.		
Wafers or gluten-free crackers require less handling than bread.		
Common cup and intinction are not permitted.		
If wine or grape juice is offered, it must be distributed in individual glasses, with enough room around each that worshippers touch only their own glass.		
Worshippers are directed back to their seats in an organized fashion, leaving physical distance between family groups.		
Pastors and assistants wash and sanitize their hands after distribution.		
Holy Baptism		
The font is sanitized and filled with clean water.		
The person to be baptized, if an infant, remains in the arms of their family.		
Family groups at the font maintain physical distance.		
The pastor wears a mask at the font.		
Water is poured on the baptized with a shell.		
The baptized is anointed with oil in a cotton ball.		
A member of the baptismal party lights the baptismal candle from the paschal candle as the words of presentation are said.		
Weddings and Funerals		
Outdoor gatherings of up to 50 people practising physical distancing are permissible.		
Weddings and funerals held within the church building must follow the same guidelines as other worship services.		
General		
Staff and volunteers receive information and training about new processes.		
Staff and volunteers have access to masks and hand sanitizer.		
Offering counters have access to gloves.		

	Person Responsible	Done
People are designated to clean and sanitize high traffic areas, including washrooms, between services.		
Leaders remain aware of new Public Health guidelines. Be prepared to discontinue in-person worship if levels of infection rise.		
Renters/Outside Groups		
Congregations may permit outside groups to use the facility providing they follow all health guidelines regarding physical distancing, etc., and the congregation/rental groups have resources to handle the cleaning requirements between each use. Facility rentals should be suspended if groups cannot or will not adhere to gathering restrictions.		
Consider requesting written details as to how the rental group will meet health guidelines, prior to their use of the facility.		